

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Monuments to Veterinary Medicine, Part I

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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For increasing members of our society, capturing history through first-person interviews represents the *saveur du mois*. National Public Radio has Story Corps,¹ middle school children are required to interview their grandparents for a class project, and 60-something baby boomers video tape their nonagenarian parents. Even throughout the veterinary profession, there are individuals, often within state veterinary medical associations who have undertaken the worthy task of preserving history by capturing oral interviews.

The interview, as people who try to capture oral histories soon discover, is the easy part. Preserving the historically-relevant information in a reliable, referenced and retrievable format is the greater challenge. Seven years ago, as I transitioned from my dean responsibilities and returned to the teaching faculty, I decided to deploy my nascent interest in people and history to develop my own version of oral history. My initial goal, to interview the most senior members of the Cornell alumni, soon blossomed into a more ambitious project (more on that in a future story).

My initial goal was to capture the oral history of as many of the living graduates of the 1930's as possible, and to create a permanent monument to their legacy in written and oral form. Early in the project, I used the term "monument" to some of my colleagues without thinking of the broader implications of the word. It was also well before the publication of Robert Edsel's book and its subsequent movie, *The Monuments Men*.² Over time, however, and as the project branched out to include alumni of colleges other than Cornell, and also more recent graduates, I realized that there are indeed important parallels between the preservation of art of the masters (as in *The Monuments Men*), and the preservation of life stories of veterinarians some of whom have changed the course of history.

Except in cases in which the principal was deceased, the interviews were conducted with the subject veterinarian. Two interviews were with surviving spouses, and three with children of the veterinarians.

In most cases, the interviews were conducted in person, with the edited audio included on line to accompany the written transcript. The audio is not available in the two cases in which the interviews were conducted by telephone rather than in person.

Without further preamble, here is an abstract of the five earliest veterinarians—graduating between 1920 and 1935—whose stories are captured and available on line at **An Enduring Veterinary Legacy** at <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/11807>



Mrs. Danielsen holding caricature of Dr. Camuti with his feline patients and his car (license CAT) 12/7/07
(Photo by the author)

The earliest graduate in this collection was **Dr. Louis J. Camuti**, a 1920 graduate of New York University. Deceased in 1981, Dr. Camuti's story was acquired through an interview with his daughter, Mrs. Nina Danielsen. The son of Italian immigrants on both his maternal and paternal sides, Camuti received an undergraduate degree from Cornell University in 1916. After some WWI service, he attained his veterinary education in New York City. After a few years working out of two small animal clinics in the city (one on Park Avenue), he developed an all-feline house call practice, the first veterinarian to reach this market exclusively. His wife and constant companion was often referred to as the *fire engine girl* because of her illegal parking habits as she had a habit of remaining in the car writing letters to her family and friends, while her husband attended to his patients. A great story teller, Camuti had numerous celebrity clients and was even a 1962 guest on the Johnny Carson show. He authored two popular books, *Park Avenue Vet* (1962),³ and *All My Patients are Under the Bed* (1980).⁴ After he died while still in practice, his family received letters and tributes from around the world. In his daughter's words, "In an era when cats were mousers and something you would kick down the stairs without a second thought, my Dad came along with his natural love for them and he gave them dignity."



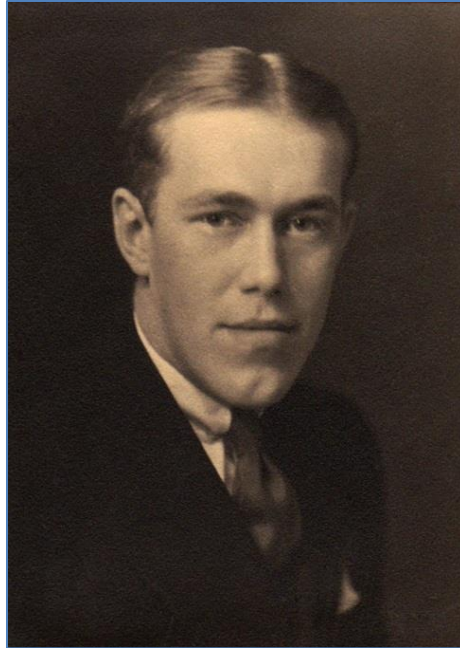
Dr. Clarence R. Roberts, 1922, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Dr. Kent Roberts narrated the story of his father, **Dr. Clarence Roberts** (Cornell 1922) who started out as a general large animal practitioner, traversing the countryside around Morrisville, New York in a Model-T Ford in summer and a horse and cutter in winter. He was being paid so often in turkeys and potatoes rather than cash that his wife, pregnant with their first child, finally insisted that he find a job with a more stable income and that was when he began to work with Sheffield Farms Company as a milk inspector. He rose rapidly through the ranks of the corporation and, at his acme, was CEO of Sealtest Foods, the milk and ice cream division of National Dairy Corporation, where he was responsible for over 20,000 employees. Roberts' story is a marvelous example of veterinary medicine being a versatile profession with opportunities far beyond clinical practice.



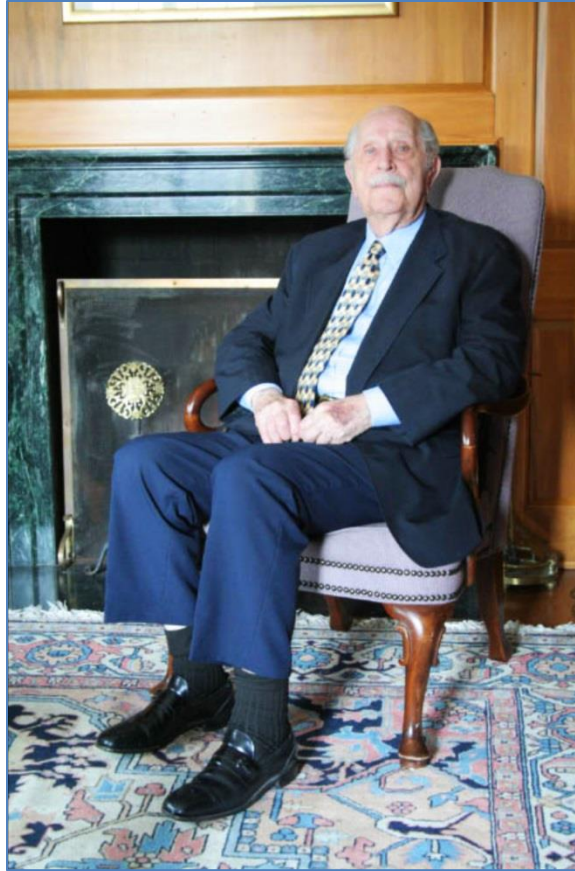
Dr. Lawrence T. Waitz, 1931, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Interviewed when he was 97 years old, **Dr. Larry Waitz** completed his DVM requirements at such a young age (20) that he had to wait several months after graduation to apply for a license to practice in New York State. His era is known in pop culture through the class of 1931's Jacob Jankowski, the hero of Sara Gruen's "Water for Elephants."⁵ When Waitz passed a few months before his 100th birthday, he was the last living Cornell alumnus to have personally known the second and third deans of the college, Veranus Moore and Pierre Fish. During his retirement years, Waitz developed his nascent artistic skills and established an association of like-minded painters in the "Tuesday Morning Group" that lasted for two decades. He also became a skilled sailor, racing and cruising in his 30-foot sailboat. Though he distinguished himself as a fine early large animal (and later small animal) veterinarian on Long Island, his several decades of life after retirement were just as rich and fulfilling and serve as a fine role model for others.



Dr. Joseph J Merenda, 1934, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Though he was not particularly interested in veterinary medicine beyond liking the animals in the kennel on the estate managed by his parents, **Dr. Joseph Merenda** was encouraged by a family friend, a Cornell Arts College alumnus, to go to veterinary college. “You go for one year. If you like it, you continue. If you don’t like it, you quit, and you’ve had a year of college.” One of the most interesting parts of Merenda’s interview is his description (some of it very humorous) of his arrival at Cornell by train in 1930 with throngs of other students and how he experienced independent living for the first time. Though he received little education in small animal medical care because of Cornell’s land grant culture that eschewed pet health, he faced the Depression bravely and without prejudice to the type of work available. When a classmate turned down a job with C.P. Zepp, one of the most famous New York City veterinarians and a patriarch of the American Animal Hospital Association, Merenda pounced on the opportunity and spent his career (except for the war years in the Army Veterinary Corps) as a small animal practitioner on West 53rd Street in Manhattan.



Dr. Tevis M. Goldhaft, 9/26/07
(Photo by the author)

Entering Cornell in 1931 as a member of the largest first-year class of the 20th century (86 students), **Dr. Tevis Goldhaft** provided insights into the life of Jewish students in a year when Cornell expanded its enrollment of Jews from two or three each year, to seventeen. The 20% quota, higher than the rest of Cornell which was closer to 10%, was maintained for the remainder of the decade. Goldhaft had wanted to go to the University of Pennsylvania because this father had graduated from there in 1910, but his father required that he follow his sister to Cornell (women were not yet allowed at Penn at the time). He spent his career developing vaccines and diagnostics for the poultry industry through the company (Vineland Laboratories) that had been established by his father. In a tribute to Goldhaft in 2006, the Merial Company called him “a True pioneer of avian vaccines” and cited his company as one of the “first, biggest and best vaccine companies.”

See Part II in this series for more monuments to veterinary medicine from the early years of the profession.

¹ [storycorps](#). Sharing and preserving the stories of our lives. NPR.

² Edsel, Robert M., with Bret Witter. [The Monuments Men](#) (Center Street, 2009).

³ Camuti, Louis J. and Alexander, Lloyd. *Park Avenue Vet* (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, Inc., 1962).

⁴ Camuti, Louis J., with Marilyn and Haskel Frankel. *All My Patients are Under the Bed* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980).

⁵ Gruen, Sara. *Water for Elephants*. (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006).

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
Careers for Veterinarians (or veterinary careers)
Pierre Fish
Veranus Moore
Lawrence Waitz
Tevis Goldhaft
Joseph Merenda
Clarence Roberts
Louis Camuti
The Monuments Men
Water for Elephants
Jacob Jankowski

TOPIC:

Oral History

LEADING QUESTION:

Who was the first veterinarian to establish an all-feline veterinary practice?

META-SUMMARY:

Interviews with early veterinarians reveal their challenges, humor, career choices, and impact on the veterinary profession.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.